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Handbook for Stringers in the Armed Forces

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Introduction

Congratulations on your selection as a inger!

So, what's a stringer?

First off, a stringer's job is not just another run-of-the-mill additional duty that requires a lot of time but provides little recognition and even less personal satisfaction. As a stringer you'll have a chance to develop hidden talents, earn recognition and see your efforts on behalf of your unit appear in print.

Naturally, you'll be able to count on your unit commander and installation or unit Public Affairs Officer for some direction, but no one will be standing over your shoulder dictating your every move.

As the eyes and ears of the Public Affairs Office in your unit, you will be able to ensure that much that deserves visibility and recognition will find its way into print rather than go unpublished, unrecorded, unknown.

Make sure you touch base with your newspaper editor and get him to explain his needs (deadlines, photo requirements, etc.) and how you can fill them while getting recognition for you and your unit at the same time.

Don't be discouraged by the fact you've ad no previous experience in public affairs work. No one expects you to develop into a Hemingway or Ernie Pyle overnight. The purpose of this handbook is to acquaint you with the fundamentals of newswriting and help you develop your newswriting skills and "nose for news" with a minimum of outside assistance.

What is news?

Many people argue that news is what you find printed in the newspaper or aired on radio and TV newscasts. And they're right – to the extent that what appears in papers or is carried on the airwaves is called "news."

More specifically, however, news is defined as "a hitherto unpublished account of an event designed to interest, inform, or entertain the reader."

The key word here is "unpublished." Once a story makes its way into print, it is essentially history. Keep in mind that it's your report of an event that makes it news – the event itself is not news.

As editors read your stories they evaluate them for three things: authenticity, good taste and mass appeal. They need to ensure the story has something meaningful to relate, that it does not offend their audience and that it will appeal to a wide range of readers.

A good news item will contain some of the following ingredients: immediacy, proximity, consequence, prominence, suspense, oddity, sex, conflict, emotion and/or progress.

Let's take a closer look at these one-by-one:

Immediacy or timeliness is one of the hallmarks of the straight news story. How interested would you be in reading about a uniform policy change that went into effect last year?

Proximity is important from the standpoint that readers will probably have little interest in a story breaking far from their community. Unless, of course, there is an element of **consequence** – some direct impact upon the reader.

Readers are also interested in persons of **prominence.**

Stories involving **suspense**, such as a proposed pay raise or uniform change which has yet to be approved, have great news value.

Then there's **oddity.** How about that guy

'n your unit who's a former enlisted man and
t promoted to chief warrant officer and major
.t the same day?

Sex also has a strong appeal for readers. No – not that kind! But what about women in combat? Women fighter pilots?

Readers enjoy stories involving **conflict**, which is one reason sports pages are so popular. By virtue of our jobs we are involved in conflict.

Never underestimate the power of **emotion.** How many readers do you think would pass up a story detailing your squadron commander's experiences when he returned home after spending five years as a Vietnam POW?

Finally, there's **progress.** No matter where you are in the military, you're going to encounter policy changes and material improvements that will be of interest to your paper's readership.

These ingredients are called the "elements of news" and directly affect the mass appeal of story.

If there's ever any question in your mind about the news value of a story you are planning, contact your newspaper editor. Remember, the editor is a professional who is there to assist you. A telephone call could save a lot of wasted effort.

Newsgathering techniques

Recognizing what goes into a news stor one thing; finding it is something else. M. news stories are obtained only after a lot of legwork and a bit of ingenuity. Most successful newspaper people cultivate a sixth sense – a "nose for news."

Reporters with a good "nose for news" don't really have the ability to sniff out a story. What they do have is a great deal of interest in their subject. For you this means taking greater interest in your unit, both from an operational and human interest viewpoint.

You can do this by making frequent visits to the various sections or subordinate units in your command and letting everyone, particularly section chiefs and subordinate commanders, know who you are and that you're interested in receiving newsworthy items from them.

Naturally, commanders are good news sources Work closely with them and try to attend organizational staff meetings.

Some of the more common newsworthy subjects include promotions, outstanding personnel (individual and group achievements – military and civilian), awards and key personnel changes. Your editor also will probab' be interested in stories about your unit's pa ticipation in major training activities or programs currently receiving command emphasis (civic action projects, ecology, energy conservation, active duty/reserve components total force programs, etc.)

Don't overlook human interest stories, i.e., the family, children, pets, humane actions, lifesaving, interesting hobbies, etc. These stories have a great deal of readership appeal.

Sports is another subject popular with readers. Report on team efforts in local competition and outstanding individual accomplishments in sporting events on or off base.

Interviewing

Once you've zeroed in on a subject, you're ng to have to go out and get the facts. In oing so you'll have to talk to various people.

Good interviewing skills are vital to you as a reporter. Not all information about a story can be researched in the library or unit files.

When conducting interviews, keep in mind that first impressions carry a lot of weight. How your source responds to your questions will depend heavily on how he or she perceives you. You'll want to make it a point to look sharp and be prompt and courteous.

Along the same line, do your homework before the interview. Don't waste your source's time by asking questions to which you could easily have found the answer in reference works, biographical sheets, regulations, etc.

It's a good idea to plan questions in advance. In doing so, avoid phrases that will solicit "yes" or "no" answers. An easy way to do this is begin your questions with one of journalism's five Ws (Who, What, When, Where, Why) and H (How). Another way to avoid "yes" or "no" responses is to use open-ended questions such as "What do you think about...?" or "What do you mean by..." or "How did you get arted in...?" These questions will also help ut your source in a more reflective mood.

The "five Ws and H" will form the core of your news story, so you will want to be sure to get answers to each of these six questions. As you listen to your source's responses, you can use them as springboards to other questions.

Don't allow your source to get sidetracked or ramble on and on about a point. Be prepared to tactfully interrupt and steer your source back to the subject. This is especially important when time is limited.

Finally, when your interview is completed, express your thanks to your source. Well deserved praise is always appreciated. Also ask your source if you can call back for more information you may need.

A note on notetaking

To avoid embarrassing yourself by c stantly having to ask your source to stop a repeat information while you laboriously transcribe his words in longhand, try following these tips:

- Develop a personal form of shorthand by using abbreviations. You can use common abbreviations (IDY, PCS, ETS, DF, MFR, RON, Wed., Thur., ad infinitum) and mix in a few of your own ("rtn" for return, "Btwn" for between – the list is limited only by your imagination and ability to decipher them).
- Get the key points (dates, facts, figures, correct names, etc.) and eliminate trivia.
- Learn to remember vivid phrases which can be written down after the interview.
- Review your notes as soon as possible after the interview and fill in the gaps in your notes while the conversation is still fresh in your mind.

Tape recording the interview is another alternative to taking everything down on your notepad. There are some built-in problems involved with using a tape recorder. Your source may not want to be taped or may become uncomfortable at the sight of a micr phone, the tape recorder may develop a m chanical failure and the amount of time necessary to transcribe the tape may be more than you can afford to spend. If you do use a recorder, be sure to take some notes about the key information just in case the tape is blank when you go back to your office. Use a tape recorder as an aid, not as a crutch. Also, a tape recorder picks up everything. Background noise can make a tape inaudible.

Newswriting techniques

"So," you say to yourself, "I've zeroed in on ıewsworthy subject, done my research, con-ıcted my interviews and transcribed my notes. Now what do I do with this mess?"

Don't panic!

Newswriting is a type of formula writing – it doesn't require a great deal of imagination.

Most news stories are written in what journalists call the "inverted pyramid style." This simply means the most important facts should go into the first paragraph, with the story's details following in descending order of importance, culminating with the least important facts at the end of the story.

This way the reader can get at the meat of the story, even if he or she reads it only part way through. Also, if the editor doesn't have space to run the entire story in the paper, he can trim it from the bottom without losing any of the important elements.

The first paragraph of a news story, the summary lead, is short (usually one sentence) and should capsulize the story for the reader by covering several or all of the five Ws and H (Who, What, When, Where, Why and How.) For example:

An aircraft mechanic of the 43rd Organizational Maintenance Squadron Monday was awarded the Air Force Commendation Medal during a ceremony on the B-52 flightline here.

In writing your lead, remember you want to attract the reader's attention and, at the the same time, summarize the story.

Emphasis becomes important here. Readers are generally going to be interested more in *who* is involved or *what* is happening than where or when it happened.

How excited would you get over a story that began:

Monday in a ceremony on the B-52 flig line the Air Force Commendation Medal w. awarded to an aircraft mechanic of the 43rd Organizational Maintenance Squadron here.

Notice the first example placed the emphasis (first few words) on *who* was involved. At the same time, the first example seems to read more naturally.

If you are writing a story that involves several people or a person who is not well known, you can use impersonal identification in your lead to save space or draw the reader into your story (as in the leads above). Instead of identifying an individual by name in the lead, use a title -- such as "aircraft mechanic." Remember, a rank is not a title.

After writing your lead you should have a one-sentence transitional or "bridge" paragraph to ease the reader into the body of your story.

This paragraph serves several functions. It can be used to introduce any of the five Ws or H that weren't covered in the lead, supply attribution for a statement made in the lead, give the name of someone identified impersonally in the lead, tie the reader back to an earlier story about the same event or introduce fac that weren't important enough to go in tl lead. For example:

Senior Airman Joseph R. Johnson received the decoration for his effort in keeping the aircraft he maintains operational for one year without any down time other than for preventive maintenance.

Once past the bridge paragraph you begin work on the body of your story. In the body you expand upon the material covered in the lead and the bridge by giving additional details about the story.

How you organize this material is subjective. There is no hard and fast rule for determining which facts are least important.

Probably the best thing you can do is put yourself in the reader's position and ask yourself which facts are the most interesting.

As you write, keep in mind the ABCs of journalism: accuracy, brevity and clarity.

- Be accurate. Your writing efforts won't get into print if the editor can't depend on the factual content of your copy. Always double-check your facts, including the spelling of all names, statistical information, dates, times and places. Be sure they are correct.
- Be brief. Keep your sentences short and try to limit your paragraphs to one to three sentences. one way to cut down sentence length is to write in the active voice (subject-verb-object) and use such grammatical shortcuts as appositives (modifying phrases or clauses) and trimming unneeded relative pronouns (who, whom, that, which, etc.).
- Be clear. Avoid wordiness, repetition or incorporating unrelated ideas in paragraphs. Dangling or misplaced modifiers (modifying words or phrases separated from the word or words they modify or left hanging at the end of a sentence) can also cause clarity problems.

Success in newswriting comes from keeping stories tight and simple.

The sports story

Nearly 25 percent of military newspapers should be devoted to sports, so you're missing the boat if you overlook your unit's participation in sporting events.

Writing sports is much like writing straight news — with a few minor variations.

The lead of your sports story will be summary in nature, but, in addition to the five Ws and H, it will include a score.

Your lead emphasis (the first few words of the story) will probably highlight *how the game was won.* Examples:

A seventh-inning home run by catcher Allen Browning capped a four-run, seventh inning rally as the H&S Company. Wildcats downed Company A, 3rd Marines, 5-1, in intramural slow pitch softball action here Wednesday.

The 3rd Brigade Tigers hung on to a narrow, half-game lead in Army Hawaii football play as they blasted the Support Command Warriors, 41-17, Tuesday night behind the strong-armed quarterbacking of Lance Shilling.

As you develop your story, key on significant plays or individual performances before going into the chronology of the game. This way, if the editor must cut your story (which is a strong possibility with the stiff competition for space on the sports page), the most important facts get in and star players get the recognition they deserve.

You should also keep in mind that avid sports page readers thrive on strong action verbs and the vivid terminology peculiar to various sporting events.

Copy editing

Don't worry about turning in letter-perfect copy. Your editor isn't interested in receiving an error-free piece of official correspondence. However, he'll want your copy to be as free of mechanical errors (spelling, grammar, punctuation) as possible. He'll also want it to read smoothly.

Rather than wasting the time it would take to go back and erase and correct mistakes or retype your story, all you need to do is use a pencil and the copy editing symbols that appear on the following pages.

Copy editing symbols

SYMBOL MEANING	EDITED COPY	EFFECT
Capitalize	ft. knox	Ft. Knox
Make lower case	the Mayor	the mayor
Make caps and lower case	C+LC FT. KNOX	Ft. Knox
Insert letter	news stories	news stories
Change letter(s)	action photo	action photo
Delete letter, close up	typewriter	typewriter
Delete letter, leave space	first sergeant	first sergeant
Insert word	and news photos	news and photos
Change word	pictures record photos	record pictures
Delete word, close up	newspaper worthy	newsworthy
Delete word, leave space	the tall men	the men
Insert space	newsphotos	news photos
Close up	news paper	newspaper
Insert period	the end. The	the end. The
Insert comma, colon, semicolon	three four and	three, four and
Insert hyphen	reenter	re-enter
Insert dash	fact for example	fact--for example
Insert quotes, apostrophe	We believe...	"We believe.."

nsert exclamation point, question mark	Wow	Wow!
Delete punctuation	white and blue	white and blue
Transpose letters	captian	captain
Transpose words	fast run	run fast
Transpose sentences, paragraphs	Apply same principle as above, or circle first item and draw arrow to desired position? note with TR	
Make opposite	Doctor Dr. twenty-one 21	Dr. Doctor 21 twenty-one
More of story to come	more	
End of story	30 or ### or end	
Not a new paragraph	battle. Soldiers	battle. Soldiers
New paragraph	battle. Soldiers	battle. Soldiers
Correct as written	Jane Austen	Jane Austen
Let it stand as before corrected	stet the M16 rifle	the M16 rifle
Center in column (heads and subheads)	The Dog	The Dog

Copy format

Your handwriting may very well be deserving of praise, but you can bet your editc will not applaud if you send in handwritte copy – he wants it typewritten.

Copy should be typed on 8 1/2" x 11" paper, using *only one side*. In the upper left corner of the first page type your name, rank, organization and telephone number.

Begin typing your story one-third of the way down the page. This allows room for the editor to mark up the copy for the printer and insert a headline.

Your copy should at least be *double-spaced* or possibly *triple-spaced*, and paragraphs indented about *five spaces*. Do not hyphenate words between lines and do not split sentences or paragraphs between pages. Triple-spacing is important because the editor needs room for corrections or inserting special instructions to the printer.

If you find you need more than one page for your release, type "more" at the bottom center of page one. In the upper left corner of page two type "RETIREMENT - Page 2" (or whatever the topic of the story is), then "RETIREMENT - Page 3," etc., on successive pages. Remember that each page should be typed on one side only and end with a completed paragraph. (A sample of a two-page news release follows on the next two pages.)

Finally, when your copy is complete, centered under the closing paragraph, type -30- or end, and circle it.

SSgt. John Doe
2d Admin Co
632-1194

BASKETBALL

Harry Harvest's 15-foot hook shot with four seconds left gave the Admin Atoms a 73-72 win over the Dental Drillers in Tuesday night's intramural basketball championship game at Bloch Arena.

This is Admin's second title in as many years. Last year they edged the School Command Titans by the same score. Admin has captured the championship four times in the last six years.

The see-saw tilt was knotted at 40 at the half. Dental, behind most of the second half, took a narrow 72-71 edge when when Frank Forrest tipped in a basket with just 20 seconds left.

With Dental in the lead in the hard-fought contest, the Atoms alled time out. When play resumed, Admin's Artie Johnson worked for position and, with 11 seconds showing on the clock, attempted a jump shot from the corner. It missed, but Harvest grabbed the rebound and hooked it in for the win.

more

BASKETBALL
Page 2

The teams went into the championship playoffs with Admin holding an 18-3 season record and Dental standing at 17-4.

Harvest led the Admin scorers with 23 points. Other Atoms in double figures included Mickey Lane with 19 and Jim Manning with 11.

Dental's Paul Plate was the game's top scorer with 24 points while teammate Forrest contributed 21.

Awards will be presented to both teams at a banquet tonight at 8 in the Cannon Room of the NCO club. Brigadier General Thomas T. Juniper, assistant division commander, 25th Infantry Division, will present the trophies.

-30-

Identifying feature material

As a stringer you are expected to furnish your editor with news stories about people and events in your unit. You can also earn recognition for your unit and its people by alerting the editor to stories that have feature potential.

When an editor speaks of a "feature story," he or she means an interesting, but not necessarily timely, article that stresses the information from a human interest angle – the human side – more than the news angle. The story may relate to the general news of the week, or it may be something that will do just as well next month or next year.

When making your rounds, keep an eye out for human interest stories. In addition to straight news stories, readers are interested in people with interesting families, pets or hobbies.

Stories about people involved in humanitarian work or who have been involved in a lifesaving action also appeal to readers.

The possibilities are endless:

- The photographer who likes to go scuba diving in search of buried treasure in his spare time.
- The master sergeant who joined the Army with a ninth grade education and just completed his master's degree.
- The 13-year-old family member who has been collecting baseball cards since she was age 6.
- The platoon leader who developed a fondness for snakes at Ranger school and now has a collection of poisonous vipers that rivals some of the world's leading zoos.
- The technical sergeant jet mechanic who spends his Sunday afternoons preaching sermons in local churches as an ordained minister.
- The lance corporal who swam 100 yards in freezing water to save the life of a 9-year-old ice skater who had fallen through the ice.
- The unit yeoman who just purchased his third Rolls Royce to add to his antique car collection.
- The engineer whose job is to tear down buildings, but has a hobby of building architectural models of buildings to scale.
- The lieutenant who has been an HO-scale railroad modeler since he was 15.

Features require time, imagination and skill to write. Your editor has a trained staff at his disposal and is always looking for ways to put his reporters' talents to use.

Photos and cutlines

There's an old saying that goes: "A picture is worth a thousand words." And it's true provided that picture doesn't require a thousand words to explain what's going on.

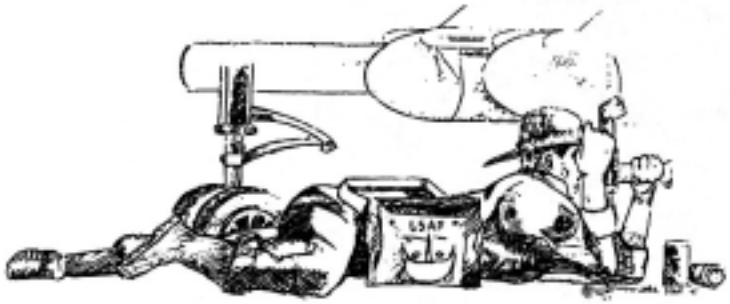
Your editor is always looking for photographs full of action and interest — pictures that will turn the reader on. If a picture can't do that, it isn't worth the space or the cost of publishing it.

Most editors are fussy, so if a news or feature event is worthy of a photo, they usually prefer to have a staff photographer shoot it. But there's a limit to the amount of coverage their staff can provide, so be sure to give as much advance notice as possible when requesting photo coverage.

If operational commitments make it impossible for the editor to provide a trained photographer and you still feel your event is worth a picture, feel free to have someone in your unit do the shooting (no polaroids, please). It's best to use black and white film.

If you're using your own photographer, be sure to stress that you want action shots. "Grip 'n' grins" (you've seen them - one person handing something to another one while shaking hands and both staring blankly at the camera) rarely get further than the editors circular file.

Instead of a shot of your battalion Soldier of the Month receiving a certificate from the "old man," get your photographer to shoot the soldier doing his job.



Have the photographer get in close. There's nothing worse than a "20-foot close-up" that requires use of a magnifying glass to determine who's who in a photo.

Don't try to crowd too many people into a shot. Keep it down to no more than three people.

No matter how good your picture, it's still going to require at least some explanatory text. This descriptive data goes into what is known as a cutline.

Cutlines have four major functions: they briefly explain the action, identify the subjects, provide background information and give credit to the photographer.

You should strive to keep your cutlines short. It there's an accompanying story, just identify the people, describe what's going on in the picture and give credit to the photographer. Don't repeat information contained in the story.

Prepare your cutlines using the same format you use for news stories and attach them to the backs of the prints using tape (no paper clips or staples, please).

All too often, unidentified mug shots get separated from releases when the mail or distribution pouch is opened. Also, if a picture must be returned to you, include your name and return address on the back of the photo, and instructions that you would like the photo returned.

When mailing prints or sending them through distribution channels, keep in mind they might not receive tender loving care. Protect your pictures by placing them in a sturdy envelope with a cardboard stiffener.

Recommended reading

CALLIHAN, E.L., Grammar for Journalist (Radnor, PA; Chilton Book Co., 3rd ed., 1979

CAPPON, Rene J., The Word — An Associated Press Guide to Good News Writing (New York The Associated Press)

CLARK, Roy Peter, Free to Write (Portsmith NH; Heinemann Educational Books 1st ed. 1987)

GARRISON, Bruce (with Mark Sabljak), Sport Reporting (Ames, Iowa; Iowa State Universit Press, 1985)

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METZLER, Ken, Creative Interviewing — The Writer's Guide to Gathering Information by Asking Questions (New Jersey; Prentice-Hal Inc., 1977)

PATTERSON, Benton Rain, Write to Be Read — a Practical Guide to Feature Writing (Ames Iowa; Iowa State University Press, 1986)

STRUNK, William Jr. and E.B. White, The Elements of Style (New York; The Macmillan Co. 3rd ed., 1979)

WILLIAMSON, Daniel R., Feature Writing for Newspapers (New York; Hastings House, 1975)

LOCAL INFORMATION

Public Affairs Office address:
Deadlines:
Editor: **Phone:**
Sports Editor: **Phone:**
Photo Lab: **Phone:**
Post Locator:
Subordinate Commander/Section Chiefs

For additional copies

Should your Public Affairs Office require extra copies of this handbook, contact your installation's printing or reproduction facility to see if they will do the job for you there. Should that not prove possible, then Army and Navy/Marine Corps PAOs can work through normal publications distribution channels. The Army carries it as DoD GEN-39, while USN/USMC offices should ask for NAVMC-26-84.

Air Force offices should order Stock Number 0903-LP-900-8150 through AFSINC, while Coast Guard organizations should contact their District PAOs.

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